

Exploring Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions of Lesson Planning in Primary Education

Cigdem Sahin-Taskin

Faculty of Education, Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University, 17000, Canakkale, Turkey

Abstract

Planning a lesson is a complex process. The relationship between the quality of a lesson plan and an effective teaching-learning process is widely acknowledged by researchers and educators. Therefore, developing pre-service teachers' planning skills is considered key in raising effective teachers. This research aims to understand pre-service teachers' perceptions of lesson and how they think their plans facilitate their creating an effective teaching-learning process. The sample involved primary pre-service teachers who enrolled in a Teaching Practice course at a faculty of education. 18 pre-service teachers participated in the research. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Content analysis was utilized to analyze the data. Two main categories emerged through the analysis; they have been named Difficulties of Planning a Lesson and Functions of Lesson Plans During the Teaching-Learning Process. The findings of the research revealed that primary pre-service teachers are aware of the importance of planning lessons; however, they found some difficulties during their planning. They claimed that during their visits to primary schools, they do not have enough time to get to know students regarding their needs, characteristics, levels of learning, etc., and these issues influence their planning. Therefore, developing a lesson plan became challenging. The results suggest that opportunities should be created for pre-service teachers to get acquainted with students during their practice. Further investigation will also help us to understand more about how we can help our future teachers to develop skills to plan their lessons effectively.

Keywords: lesson plan, pre-service teachers, teacher training

1. Introduction

Many researchers indicate that lesson plans are of great importance in providing an effective learning environment (Clark & Dunn 1991, Johnson, 2000; Rusznyak & Walton, 2011). Brittin (2005) stated that teachers are required to set up a learning environment in which students can learn effectively, and this involves planning materials, strategies and timing. A lesson plan is a document that shows what will happen in a particular timeframe (Whitton, Sinclair, Barker, Nanlohy & Nosworthy, 2004). Farrell (2002:30) also defined the lesson plan as 'a written description of how students will move toward attaining specific objectives'. Similarly, Vdovina and Gaibisso (2013) indicated that a lesson plan helps teachers to have a framework for carrying their students to certain "learning destinations". It involves goals, knowledge, and sequencing, as well as activity procedure, implementation, and assessment (Jacobs, Martin, Otieno, 2008). Lesson planning connects requirements of the curriculum and textbooks with what is presented in the classroom (Lee, Chen & Khum, 2009). Thus, preparing a lesson plan helps pre-service teachers to organize their activities, construct their goals, and get feedback from their supervisors (Kagan & Tippins, 1992). Accordingly, planning is one of the crucial skills that pre-service teachers should gain during their training.

During their education, pre-service teachers are trained to plan their lessons. The literature revealed that pre-service teachers find planning their lessons difficult (Tashevska, 2008). Additionally, the literature also emphasized that novice teachers spend more time planning their lessons and find planning to be challenging (Richards, 1998; Senior, 2006). Johnson (2000) also indicated that pre-service teachers found the initial lesson planning steps 'cumbersome'. He pointed out that experienced teachers internalized the lesson planning process and that, therefore, pre-service teachers' plans are different than the experienced teachers' plans. However, Miller (2009) claimed that the details of a lesson plan depend on local and personal circumstances. For example, whether pre-service teachers focus on learning from a textbook as in a traditional context or develop the materials themselves influences the way they write their plans. Teacher training programs help them to understand the importance of planning, as well as to plan their lessons effectively. Therefore, understanding pre-service teachers' views about planning will help us to understand the way they plan their lessons and give us insights into the ways in which teacher educators prepare them to teach effectively.

Lesson plans help pre-service teachers to close the gap between theory and practice. For example, Dunn, Craig, Favre, Markus, Pedota, Sookdeo, Stock and Terry (2010) indicated that although educators express the importance of multiple intelligences, when it comes to students' learning styles in the teaching-learning process, many of the teachers continue to teach conventionally. Besides, teachers claimed that lesson plans also help them to schedule required curriculum content. McCutcheon (1980) identified internal and external reasons for planning a lesson. The internal reasons for teachers involve feeling confident, learning the subject matter better, and enabling lessons to run more smoothly, as well as predicting problems before they happen. The external

reasons include fulfilling the requirements of the school principal and guiding a substitute teacher if the class needs one. These benefits enable pre-service teachers to be more comfortable during the teaching-learning process. Choy, Wong, Lim and Chong (2013) stated that lesson plans reflect teachers' interpretations of subject matter, as well as the way they adopt instructional materials, as influenced by the extent to which the teacher is informed about learners' prior knowledge and the topic to be presented. In lesson plans, we can see how pre-service teachers transform learning theory into practice. Furthermore, planning enables pre-service teachers to think through what they teach, how they teach, and how to evaluate their teaching (Ruys, Keer & Aeltermans; 2012). However, student teachers lack experience in planning and organizing teaching activities (Nilsson, 2009). Therefore, understanding pre-service teachers' perceptions of the way lesson plans guide them to teach will help researchers to understand how they think and decide about their teaching. This will enable researchers and teacher educators to help pre-service teachers plan their lessons and teach effectively. Thus, the research focused on exploring pre-service teachers' perceptions of lesson plans. The research aims are stated as follows:

- to understand pre-service teachers' perceptions of lesson plans
- to understand how they think their plans facilitate their creation of an effective teaching-learning process

2. Sampling and Data Collection

Since this research focuses on pre-service teachers' perceptions of planning, their experiences of planning were considered important for this research. Pre-service teachers in their final year enroll in the Teaching Experience Course. In this course, they are required to teach and prepare lesson plans. Therefore, the sample involved pre-service teachers who enrolled in a Teaching Experience course during the 2015-2015 academic year. 18 pre-service teachers participated in the research. Semi-structured interviews were used in order to collect the data. Semi-structured interviews enable researchers to explore views, perceptions and opinions and clarify the answers through asking spontaneous questions. They are also flexible and allow the researcher to probe and expand the interviewees' responses and, thus, enable the researcher to explore the subject in depth (Rubin & Rubin, 2005: 88). Fontana and Frey (2000: 645) also indicated that they are "one of the most powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings". Therefore, they are considered appropriate for this study.

Pre-service teachers were informed about the purpose of the research. The interviews were held at the university and conducted at times that were suitable both for the pre-service teachers and the researcher. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes. Participating in the research was voluntary. Pre-service teachers were informed that they could choose not to participate or withdraw from the research at any time. They were also told that identities would be confidential. Interviews are recorded and transcribed verbatim.

3. Data Analysis

Content analysis has been used in order to analyze the data. An inductive coding approach is used to generate the codes in this research. In an inductive approach, 'themes and categories emerge from the data through the researcher's careful examination and constant comparison' (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005). Therefore, inductive coding requires close readings of text, and the researcher needs to consider the multiple meanings in the text (Thomas, 2006). In this research, the interview transcriptions were read carefully by the researcher. Concepts and categories were pulled directly from the data. The researcher read the data several times, described the meaning of the categories, and wrote memos about the categories (Thomas, 2006). This helped her to discover the associations, links, and relationships among the categories. Two main categories emerged through the analysis: Difficulties of Planning a Lesson and Functions of the Lesson Plans During the Teaching-Learning Process.

4. Findings

All pre-service teachers who participated in the research stated that they planned their lessons during their practice, but they also indicated that they had some difficulties during their planning:

*I found it difficult to find activities that are appropriate regarding students' learning levels, interests and needs. I want my all students to participate in the activities I organize, but I found it difficult to develop an activity. PT10
When I plan my lessons, I most of the time have difficulty finding an activity. I hesitate over whether the activity is appropriate for the children. PT3*

Pre-service teachers stated above that when they plan their lessons during their practice, they find it difficult to find an activity that is appropriate regarding the students' learning level. For example, PT10 indicated that she had difficulty to find an appropriate activity regarding students' learning levels, interests, and needs. Similarly, PT3 also found it difficult to determine whether her activities planned for her students meet the students' levels. Informal talk with PT3 revealed that students' levels referred to learning levels. PT10 also claimed that she found it difficult to develop an activity. A close examination of the data revealed that many pre-service teachers also found it difficult to prepare an activity appropriate for their students' learning levels:

Since we don't know students and their learning levels, the activities we prepare are difficult or easy for them. PT4

Since I didn't have an opportunity to observe the students previously, I found it difficult to prepare a lesson plan for their learning level. PT1

I found difficult to prepare a lesson plan for some lessons because, I don't know the students' characteristics, individual differences and learning levels. Therefore, I found it difficult to find an activity. Since, we don't know students' needs and expectations, we may not plan our lessons effectively. PT7

PT4 and PT1 indicated that when they planned their lessons, they couldn't find an appropriate activity for their students' learning levels. Examining the Teaching Experience course reveals that pre-service teachers practice in schools one day a week during the semester. Each week, they visit a different class to gain a wide range of experience. Therefore, they do not have an opportunity to get acquainted with the students they teach. This influences their choice of activities negatively when they plan their lessons. Moreover, PT7 pointed out that apart from students' learning levels, during planning she needs to know students' characteristics, individual differences, needs, and expectations. She also explained that since she does not know them, she found it difficult to prepare an activity, and this prevents her from planning her lessons effectively. When teachers prepare lesson plans, they consider the learning competence of the students (Farell, 2002). This entails getting better acquainted with students and taking into account their needs and expectations. Similarly, many of the pre-service teachers also claimed that students' characteristics play an important role in preparing lesson plans:

Lesson plans should be changed according to the students' characteristics. Since each class has a different structure, you have to make some changes during the practices. If you have a class in which there are students who have learning difficulties, then you should reduce the number of activities. You need to talk slowly and consider the students' learning s. You can explain a subject in a class only once, but in another class you may need to explain twice or more. PT9

I consider the students' learning levels when I prepare my lesson plans. If there are students who have strong visual intelligence in the classroom, then I use visual tools more. PT10

Each student is different, and the students' profiles in each class are different. The activities I prepare for the lesson plan may be effective in one classroom, but may not be as effective in another classroom. PT12

Pre-service teachers indicated that students' characteristics and learning levels in a classroom are important factors in preparing lesson plans. PT9 and PT12 stated that each class has a different structure, which influences the preparation of a lesson plan. A close examination of PT9's statement showed that she also mentioned that the presence of students with learning difficulties in a class influences the activities that take place in the teaching-learning process. PT10 said that if the classroom has students with visual intelligence, she considers this during planning and uses visual tools during her lesson. This shows that she considers multiple intelligences when she prepares her lesson plans. Apart from these explanations, some of the pre-service teachers pointed out that they were required to follow the guide book, which leads to some difficulties:

The biggest problem in preparing a lesson plan is that we don't have the guide book PT5

I found it difficult to prepare the lesson plans when they [the teachers] want us to follow the guide book and only to use the activities it involves PT4

The explanations above show that primary teachers suggest that pre-service teachers use the guide books. For example, PT5 indicated that she does not have the guide book and therefore found it difficult to prepare the lesson plans. PT4's explanations also supported this. However, she found following the guide book difficult. Informal talk with PT4 pointed out that she could prepare different activities that she believes will allow her to teach better through using them. Therefore, she found it difficult only to use the activities in the guide book. She also stated that since she has not met the students previously, she is not sure whether she will be comfortable with the activities in the guide book. Informal talk with pre-service teachers also indicated that many of the pre-service teachers feel uncomfortable when asked only to use the activities in the guide book. The guide books inform teachers what to do at different stages of the lessons. Since the 2005-2006 academic year, constructivism has been acknowledged in the primary curriculum in Turkey. Thus, the guide books prepared by the Ministry of National Education aimed to help teachers who use a traditional approach and have specific teaching habits to understand to what extent the primary curriculum has been changed (Ayvacı & Er-Nas, 2009). Therefore, the guide books help teachers to use the textbooks effectively (Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2004). However, pre-service teachers found it difficult to use these guide books. Apart from these explanations, one of the pre-service teachers also stated that she had trouble determining the appropriate teaching methods when she is developing a lesson plan:

I don't know the teaching methods and techniques. Therefore, I found it difficult to develop a lesson plan PT8

PT8 claimed that influences has a lack of understanding regarding the teaching methods and techniques and this influence her planning negatively. This draws attention to the importance of pedagogy courses. Effective teaching in pedagogy courses will contribute to the pre-service teachers' ability to plan their lessons and professional development.

Almost all pre-service teachers expressed that lesson plans they prepared during the Teaching Experience course helped their teaching. They indicated that lesson plans help them know how and when to use the activities they prepared during the lesson:

Lesson plans help me to determine what to do in the lesson and at what stages to do it. They also help me to explain the activities better, and I sometimes check the plan during the lesson, and thus, I don't miss anything I planned. PT10

Lesson plans help me to be more planned and organized. Through the lesson plans I can decide which activity I should use next better; besides, if I forget what to do during the lesson, it reminds me. PT2

If you prepare your lesson plan, you know how to teach and what to do during the lesson. Your teaching becomes more effective. PT17

The pre-service teachers above indicated that lesson plans help them to decide what kind of activities they will use during the lesson and when they will use them, as well as helping them to be more planned and organized. For example, PT10 stated that lesson plans help her to decide what to do in the lesson and at what stages to do those activities. PT2 stated that lesson plans help her to decide which activity she should use next. She also pointed out that if she forgets what to do next, the lesson plan reminds her. It also helps her to be planned and organized. In support, PT17 stated that lesson plans help her know how to teach and what to do during the lesson and that they help her teaching to be effective. Supporting their statements, Cameron (2006) states that in lesson plans, 'pre-service teachers are advised to provide very specific details to enable them to have a very clear understanding of every aspect, and the sequence, of the lesson'. This also shows that lesson plans help pre-service teachers, as expected. Informal talk with PT17 also revealed that she believed lesson plans help teachers to use time effectively. Strangis, Pringle and Konpf (2006) also pointed out that one of the issues planning helps pre-service teachers address is time management, and this also enables pre-service teachers to learn the needs of the learners and meet them. PT9's explanation regarding the lesson plan is stated as follows:

The lesson plans I prepared during the Teaching Experience course did not much contribute to my teaching because I can change the plans according to the classroom's structure and the learning level. The only benefit of the lesson plans is that they helped me to determine what kind of activities I will use during the lesson. Otherwise, during the lesson, everything happens instantly. Since each class has a different construction, the lesson plans only show me the order of the activities. PT9

A lesson plan is described by MoNE (2003) as a plan that is prepared through the contribution of teachers who teach the same grade and involves the objectives of the lesson, the experiments to be carried out during the lesson, questions, projects and tasks, and lesson materials. As is understood, the lesson plan contains a detailed description of the lesson. However, the pre-service teacher above indicates that it only helps her to sequence the activities she will teach during the lesson. She claims that except for the activities, everything happens instantly. This reveals that the pre-service teacher is not aware of the function and importance of a lesson plan.

All of the pre-service teachers pointed out that the lesson plans they developed show differences according to the subjects:

Lesson plans show differences according to the different subjects. For example; in maths and science, I prepare activity-based lesson plans in which students can be active. PT14

In each subject, the methods, techniques, activities, and materials we use are different. Therefore, lesson plans are different PT5

Aims are different in each subject and this influences the lesson plans PT7

The pre-service teachers above stated that the subjects they teach influence their preparation of lesson plan. PT5 stated that since in each subject methods, techniques, activities and materials are plans, this influences to prepare a lesson plan. Lesson plans address issues like materials and strategies that will be used during the teaching-learning process, as well as time management (Brittin, 2005). Pre-service teachers' explanations reveal that they are aware of the fact that the content of the subjects influences the preparation of lesson plans.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

Pre-service teachers who participated in the research pointed out that they have difficulty finding appropriate activities for their students' learning levels. Supporting this finding, previous literature also indicates that pre-service teachers lack experience regarding planning and managing teaching activities (Nilsson, 2009). Examining the finding closely, as stated above, pre-service teachers visit different classrooms each week during their practice in primary schools. Therefore, they do not have enough time to get to know the students adequately. This makes it difficult for them to find activities to use during their practice. However, having information about the students they will teach before their practice may help them to solve this problem. Accordingly, there is a need for arranging a meeting between classroom teachers and the pre-service teachers within their practice. In Turkey's Teaching Practice course, primary pre-service teachers visit primary schools for two semesters. They visit one day a week during the semester, and each semester has 14 weeks. This shows us that they have very limited time to get to know the students. Also, pre-service teachers talk about their lesson plans with peers,

teacher educators, and mentor teachers, which helps us to understand their implicit pedagogical knowledge (Ruys, Keer & Aelterman; 2012). Pre-service teachers in the present study meet with their teacher educators for two hours every week and discuss their experiences in school as well as planning. However, since they do not meet their mentor teachers before their visits to schools, they have difficulty understanding the students' level of learning, needs, and expectations. Therefore, enabling pre-service teachers to spend more time in schools will help them to develop their teaching skills.

The findings revealed that the mentor teachers suggested pre-service teachers use guide books prepared for primary teachers. Guide books aim to help teachers understand how to teach the subjects, establish relationships between the knowledge, skills and ideas and to decide the activities will be used during the teaching-learning (Köseoğlu et. al., 2003). Thus pre-service teachers' use of guide books to prepare their lesson plans when needed will contribute to their professional development. However, since students' readiness, pre-existing knowledge and experiences are important, teachers should be careful when they use the guide book and should use appropriate activities (Bakar, Keleş, Koçakoğlu, 2009). As mentioned previously, pre-service teachers are aware of the importance of issues such as students' level of learning, needs, and expectations, as well as individual characteristics. Although mentor teachers' thoughts on these topics were not explored in this research, there is a possibility that they may suggest pre-service teachers use the guide books during the teaching-learning process to help them to provide effective teaching. However, pre-service teachers find it difficult to follow the guide books. One of the reasons they found them difficult to use was simply that some of them do not have guide books. Additionally, pre-service teachers are trained to prepare activities to teach a subject; however, if mentor teachers insist on their only using the activities in the guide book, pre-service teachers feel uncomfortable. The reason pre-service teachers found it difficult to use the activities in the guide book is that they prefer different activities that they feel comfortable teaching and believe are appropriate for the students. Previous literature also supports their views and indicates that 'lesson planning should never be dictated by rigid standards that prevent and stifle creativity' (Moore & Hansen, 2012:118). Findings revealed the importance of informing pre-service teachers about how to use guide books effectively. Through the co-operation of mentor teachers and teacher trainers, pre-service teachers could be helped to use guide books to plan their lessons.

A majority of the pre-service teachers stated that preparing a lesson plan helps them to prepare and organize the activities and manage their time. However, one of the pre-service teachers claimed that apart from deciding which activities they will use during the lesson, lesson plans do not help them. Nevertheless, lesson plans help pre-service teachers to be more organized and to use teaching-learning process effectively. Lesson plans also contribute to evaluate the teaching-learning process and curricula (MoNE, 2003). The pre-service teacher's explanation of lesson plans shows that she does not have adequate information and is not aware of the importance of lesson plans. Although other pre-service teachers stated that preparing a lesson plan guides them in organizing the activities they will use during the lesson, a close examination of the data revealed that they could not give in-depth explanations. Consequently, informing pre-service teachers about the importance of lesson plans through the courses they take during their training as well as their practice will contribute to their professional development. Previous literature indicated that planning a lesson is a difficult and complex process which involves an understanding of content and pedagogical knowledge, as well as the ability to use critical thinking skills (Setyono, 2016). Therefore, mentor teachers and teacher trainers need to collaborate with each other to help pre-service teachers to prepare effective lesson plans. However, it is important to note the limitation that the research only focused on pre-service teachers' perceptions of planning a lesson. Since lesson plans do not always provide information about actual practices, using multiple sources of evidence will help us to understand to what extent pre-service teachers plan their lessons effectively (Nijveldt, 2007). Therefore, exploring primary teachers' views about them in addition to analyzing pre-service teachers' lesson plans will help us to acquire deeper understanding of how pre-service teachers learn to plan their lessons.

Overall, the findings of this research offered insights into the pre-service teachers' perceptions of developing lesson plans. Findings revealed that although most of the pre-service teachers are aware of the importance of lesson planning, they found it difficult to develop a lesson plan. This leads us to the point that they do not have enough time to gain experience to get to know students so that they can consider their levels of learning, needs, and expectations to develop lesson plans. This indicates that paying more attention to pre-service teachers' preparation of lesson plans by researchers, as well as teacher educators and mentor teachers, will help enable them to develop their planning skills.

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